

A sustainable future in health: ensuring as health professionals our own house is in order and leading by example

Nicholas J Talley

It is time for health professionals to step up and lead to ensure a sustainable environment and health



The year 2020 is fast becoming the year of planetary crises, from global warming and the unprecedented bushfire season in Australia over the summer to the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) pandemic striking around the globe, with its health and financial implications.^{1–3} Social media is littered with often uninformed opinions about both issues, from those unconcerned

and arguing the problems are exaggerated or worse to those who are deeply concerned and searching for better solutions. The facts about the climate crisis and health are more stark, as pointed out by Madden and Capon⁴ in this issue of the Journal and by the most recent *Lancet–MJA* countdown report⁵ — overwhelming evidence points to a warming planet because of human activity and to the potential for very severe adverse health consequences, including other infectious disease outbreaks, if prompt action is not taken now. The recent unprecedented bushfire season may have shifted views about the potential for severe impacts of global warming on health, just as the unfolding health crisis with COVID-19 has highlighted how vulnerable our health systems are to new pathogens. There has not been political inertia in the United Kingdom, where all sides of politics recognise the global emergency we all face because of climate change.⁶ However, more effective political action is needed here and around the world in terms of ensuring a sustainable future.

Of Australia's carbon emissions, the health care system accounts for about 7%.⁷ As individual health practitioners, we can each make a difference in terms of the carbon footprint.⁸ We can lead by example in our homes and practices and with how we travel. We can educate our patients and those we work with and train. And we can influence the health system we are a key part of too, for example, by working on strategies to drive down carbon emissions, waste and pollution from our hospitals. With a concerted effort, the Australian health system could achieve zero net emissions and relatively soon, and we applaud all the ongoing state initiatives.^{9,10}

The *MJA* pledges to do our part. AMPCo — the company that publishes the *MJA* — has an investment policy that rules out any direct investment in fossil fuels. We plan a staged reduction in print to reduce the impact on forests while providing a high quality digital alternative, and although we wrap the print version of the *MJA* in biodegradable plastic, avoidance of waste is also a priority. And we will work collectively to promote a sustainable planet for us and for future generations, presenting

the emerging data and updating them regularly to help drive optimal evidence-based policy. This is the theme of the current issue and we look forward to your feedback.

The SARS-CoV-2 pandemic has made it very clear we must be ready to step up and deliver additional high quality care and public health in a crisis, but wherever possible, we need to be able to do so without causing ecological damage or depleting precious resources required by those most in need.¹¹ In a crisis, both system and individual change is necessary but it would seem unethical to do otherwise. The impact of global warming, like COVID-19, is an ongoing global crisis, as over 11 000 scientists have warned.¹²

The time for complacent acceptance of the status quo must end; it is time for health professionals to step up and lead on a sustainable environment and health. At the *MJA* we hope every health professional will work to do so with us.

Competing interests: Nicholas Talley is Editor-in-Chief of the *Medical Journal of Australia*. A complete list of disclosures is available at <https://www.mja.com.au/journal/staffeditor-chief-professor-nick-talley>. ■

© 2020 AMPCo Pty Ltd

- 1 Yu P, Xu R, Abramson MJ, et al. Bushfires in Australia: a serious health emergency under climate change. *Lancet Planet Health* 2020; 4: e7–e8.
- 2 Vardoulakis S, Jalaludin BB, Morgan GG, et al. Bushfire smoke: urgent need for a national health protection strategy. *Med J Aust* 2020; 212: 349–353.
- 3 Cheng A, Williamson D. An outbreak of COVID-19 caused by a new coronavirus: what we know so far. *Med J Aust* 2020; <https://doi.org/10.5694/mja2.50530> [Epub ahead of print]. <https://www.mja.com.au/journal/2020/212/10/outbreak-covid-19-caused-new-coronavirus-what-we-know-so-far>
- 4 Madden DL, Capon A, Trusket PG. Environmentally sustainable health care: now is the time for action. *Med J Aust* 2020; 212: 361–362.
- 5 Beggs PJ, Zhang Y, Bambrick H, et al. The 2019 report of the *MJA–Lancet* Countdown on health and climate change: a turbulent year with mixed progress. *Med J Aust* 211: 490–491. <https://www.mja.com.au/journal/2019/211/11/2019-report-mja-lancet-countdown-health-and-climate-change-turbulent-year-mixed>
- 6 BBC News. UK Parliament declares climate emergency. *BBC News* 2019, 1 May. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-48126677> (viewed Mar 2020).
- 7 Malik A, Lenzen M, McAlister S, McGain F. The carbon footprint of Australian health care. *Lancet Planet Health* 2018; 2: e27–35.
- 8 Sainsbury P, Charlesworth K, Madden D, et al. Climate change is a health issue: what can doctors do? *Intern Med J* 2019; 49: 1044–1048.
- 9 Sutton B, Mulvenna V, Voronoff D, Humphrys T. Acting on climate change and health in Victoria. *Med J Aust* 2020; 212: 345–346.
- 10 Weeramantiri TS, Joyce S, Bangor-Jones R. Climate health inquiry: where sustainability, public health law and climate action intersect. *Med J Aust* 2020; 212: 347–349.
- 11 NHS England, Public Health England. Sustainable Development Unit: what is sustainable health? [website] <https://www.sduhealth.org.uk/policy-strategy/what-is-sustainable-health.aspx> (viewed Mar 2020).
- 12 Ripple WJ, Wolf C, Newsome TM, et al. World scientists' warning of a climate emergency. *BioScience* 2020; 70: 8–12. ■